



**ՄԱՍՆԱԳԻՏԱԿԱՆ ՊԱՏՐԱՍՏՈՒՄ ԵՎ ՎԵՐԱՊԱՏՐԱՍՏՈՒՄ / INITIAL AND CONTINUOUS TRAINING / ПРОФЕССИОНАЛЬНАЯ ПОДГОТОВКА И ПЕРЕПОДГОТОВКА**



**ԽՈՒՐՇՈՒԴՅԱՆ ԱՐՏԱՇԵՍ**

*սոցիոլոգիական գիտությունների թեկնածու, ՀՀ Արդարադատության ակադեմիայի հեռաուսուցման և տեղեկատվական տեխնոլոգիաների դեպարտամենտի ղեկավար*

**KHURSHUDYAN ARTASHES**

*Candidate of Sociological sciences, Head of Distance Learning and IT Department of the Academy of Justice of Armenia*

**ХУРШУДЯН АРТАШЕС**

*кандидат социологических наук, начальник департамента дистанционного обучения и информационных технологий Академии юстиции Армении*

**ԱԶԱԿՑՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ ՈՒՆԿԵՐՆԵՐԻՆ ՀԵՌԱՈՒՍՈՒՑՄԱՆ ԵՎ ԷԼԵԿՏՐՈՆԱՅԻՆ ՈՒՍՈՒՑՄԱՆ ԳՈՐԾԸՆԹԱՅՈՒՄ\***

**TRAINEE SUPPORT IN DISTANCE EDUCATION AND E-LEARNING\***

**СОДЕЙСТВИЕ СЛУШАТЕЛЯМ В ПРОЦЕССЕ ДИСТАНЦИОННОГО И ЭЛЕКТРОННОГО ОБУЧЕНИЯ\***

Trainee support is a central component in open and distance education. The quality and scale of student support mechanisms define the overall quality of open and distance education programs. It is implemented by educational organization mostly in two ways - technical and human. Technical resources, for instance, are instructional design of study materials, study guides, teaching aids, different types of questionnaires, statistical analyses methods and etc. Human resources are counselors and instructors who offer permanent support and advice throughout trainee’s career.

Before going into the details of trainee support possibilities in open and distance education, we need to point out that in conventional education face-to-face communications may have range of drawbacks too. Linguistic, psychological, interpersonal, cultural, environmental distances may exist in face-to-face communication<sup>1</sup>. So, in conventional education too, where face-to-face communication is main teaching method, trainee support mechanisms may be useful.

Range of research is done in the field of trainee support in distance education, open and distance education and e-learning. We would mainly focus on open and distance education and e-learning because of high trainees’ drop-out rates. In open and distance education, trainees suffer the most because of free admission and absence of testing of prior knowledge and skills. As regards e-learning, it has its specificities in terms of provision of trainee support and relatively new subject in terms of research in the field of trainee support.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Tait, Reflections on Student Support in Open and Distance Learning, Open University, UK, 2003. P. 1-7.



What do we mean by saying trainee support? It is assistance provided to trainees to study as productive and successful as possible and is implemented by educational organization.

As we have already mentioned, the first generation of distance education – correspondence education suffered tremendous loss of trainees in the process of education, one of the main reasons of which was absence of trainee support. Because of this fact, many universities and educational policy makers criticized education at a distance for many years.

But, this situation has started to change since foundation of Open University of the United Kingdom, the FernUniversität in Hagen, Germany and Universidad Nacional de Educacion a Distancia in Madrid, Spain. Trainee support services provided by these educational organizations played crucial role in that regard. Trainee support services had a tremendous impact on the accreditation process of distance education programs and quality assurance. Only after promotion and development of trainee support services in distance education institutions, national and international bodies made decision to award university degrees, certificates and college diplomas for courses provided at a distance. Nowadays, many open and distance education institutions around the world provide degree programs and award diplomas which are officially recognized by the state bodies<sup>1</sup>.

Trainee support in open and distance education system shall start before the actual learning starts - at the pre-enrolment stage. To provide successful and productive learning environment, educational organization needs to enroll the trainee on the right course in terms of both content and level. For that purpose, educational organization may use other trainees' opinions, tester materials, and different sorts of diagnostic materials.

Other trainees' opinions might be very useful in terms of trainee support. For example, like a person who wants to buy a car, usually asks an advice from other persons who have a similar model, a trainee can ask advice from other trainees who have been already enrolled in the course which is of his/her interest. At the same time, trainee's choice cannot be fully based on other trainees' opinion. The drawback, in this case, is that other trainees' comments or advices have limited usability. They may be very subjective, cannot consider the issue of student background for a particular course. Besides, comments and advices made by other trainees almost always cover partial views on a course<sup>2</sup>.

“Taster packs” might be useful in a trainee support too. “Taster packs” essentially are previews of the courses which should be available for trainees before the course starts. Substantial limitation of the preview materials is that they cannot detect the right background knowledge of a trainee for a course. There can be used also generic self-assessed diagnostic materials which are mainly based on statistical analysis methods. They use characteristics of successful students to create “predicted probability of success” of potential trainees. These characteristics usually include information on gender, age, social status, job status (full time, part-time, no job), prior knowledge and skills and etc. In this case, trainees can see in advance, what their chances are for successful completion of the course and make relevant adjustments. For instance, a trainee who initially wanted to be enrolled in the course which has a load of 20 hours per week and requires strong analytical skills may change his mind and take a course which has a load of 10 hours per week and is more descriptive. The more information is provided by trainees, the more are chances of precision of prediction. The problem with this method is that it is almost always impossible to collect comprehensive information on trainees.

<sup>1</sup> D. Keegan, The role of student support in e-learning system. Ireland Ericsson. Adelphi Centre, Dun Loaghaire Ireland, 2003. P. 1.

<sup>2</sup> O. Simpson, Retention and Course Choice in Distance Learning//Distance and E-learning in Transition: Learning Innovation, Technology and Social Challenges, 2009. P. 4.



Comprehensive trainee data collection is challenging and time consuming task for educational organizations around the world.

There are two types of diagnostic materials which a trainee can take. The first type of diagnostic materials is questionnaires which are assessed by an educational organization itself. The second type of diagnostic materials is self-assessed questionnaires where the answers are either correct or incorrect, in other words, they contain close ended questions. In case of science or technology subjects they might be very useful. But, in case of arts or social science, where either/or approach cannot be used effectively, difficulties arise<sup>1</sup>.

All the methods presented above have their advantages and disadvantages in terms of organizational, financial, time and other limitations. The best way to deal with this issue is to try combining all these approaches and making maximum results.

Another topical issue in trainee support is motivation of trainees. There are two main approaches which were widely exercised for a while in this field - remediation and learning skills development.

Remediation approach suggests, first of all, identifying weaknesses in learners. Then, start working on weaknesses to eventually overcome them.

But, in many cases, the use of this approach is questionable. Results of the research handled in London School of Economics in 2006 showed that students receiving mathematics remedial classes did not get much benefit from them. Moreover, if remedial classes do not have results in short period of time they may lead to disappointment among students who were already disadvantaged. As regards the development of learning skills, it is not clear how they are developed. Usually, when we see that particular learner has good learning skills, he is a good trainee. Therefore, it is not really clear what good learning skill really is. There is no universally accepted best way to learn something. Some trainees learn well when they take notes, while others do not learn better when they do so.

The best way to work with disadvantaged trainees, who do not succeeded in learning process quickly and are close to be disappointed and feel demoralized, is development of learning motivation<sup>2</sup>. There is range of theories of learning motivation, which are the following:

- “Self-determination Theory”;
- “Epistemological Identity Theory”;
- “Expectancy Value Theory”;
- “Self-perceived Competence Theory”;
- “Self-concordance” model;
- “Self-efficacy Theory”;
- “Interest Development Model”;
- Keller’s Attention, Relevance, Confidence and Satisfaction model.

There is no universal learning motivation theory which can be used in all distance education programs. Different theories can be applied in different learning situations. We will stop shortly on those theories which are more suitable to be used in learning situations at a distance.

### **Self-determination theory**

Central point in self determination theory is a concept of “Autonomous Study Motivation”. In accordance with it, learner should have a freedom to choose pacing of the learning and be involved in it. Trainee’s positive and negative feelings about their study experience should be recognized as well. The tenets of this theory are in contradiction with such study principles as deadlines, surveillance

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., P. 8-11.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., P. 161.



and etc. It cannot be used in the rigid educational systems where there are strict deadlines for submission of assignments. However, the case with UK Open University shows that courses which allow the students freedom in terms assignment submission dates and general participation in the course structure, tend to have maximum students retention<sup>1</sup>.

As regards especially negative feelings of trainees about learning experience, they must be of central attention for distance education providers. These negative feelings may help to diagnose the problems wherever they exist.

### **Epistemological Identity Theory**

This theory claims that learners, throughout the whole study process, should be able to say “this particular learning is exactly right for me”. In other words, this theory says that the best way for learner’s motivation is to make him feel that he/she is on right course in terms of content, level and outcomes. Of course, this is not enough for development of complete and successful motivation because the factors of insufficient time and lack of other options for trainee support are critical<sup>2</sup>.

### **Self-perceived Competence Theory**

In accordance with this theory, trainees often don’t have realistic views on their competencies which may hinder successful learning. Assisting trainees to develop rational view of themselves would help their motivation. But this theory does not provide ways how to do that.

All above mentioned theories rather detect problems but do not suggest how to overcome them. However, there is theoretical model which has methodologies to promote learning motivation-the “Strengths Approach” in Positive Psychology<sup>3</sup>.

### **Positive Psychology-the “Strengths Approach”**

The central point in the theory of positive psychology is to understand what makes people happy. “Positive Psychology ... is the scientific study of optimal human functioning [that] aims to discover and promote the factors that allow individuals ... to thrive. [It is the] psychology of happiness, flow, and personal strengths”. The “Strengths” approach to learner support arises from findings from positive psychology, and is partly based on studies by Anderson and Clifton in the United States and published by the Gallup organization. It focuses on enhancing learner motivation by emphasizing the importance of self-esteem as a vital factor in learning progress. Such an approach perfectly in tune with spirit of open and distance education where educators should encourage learners through different means in their strengths rather than to use remedial approach which is mostly proved to be futile activity. As Anderson suggests, “The best predictor of student retention is motivation. Retention services need to clarify and build on motivation and address motivation-reducing issues. Most students dropout because of reduced motivation”<sup>4</sup>.

### **The value of the “Strengths approach” and proactive motivational support**

Boniwell suggests, advisers or counselors responsible for student support during the initial meeting with new learner should put into practice nine-point approach of “Strengths approach” which is the following:

- (1) Emphasize the positive during initial contact;
- (2) Focus on existing assets and competencies;
- (3) Draw out past successes and high point moments;

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., P. 161.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., P. 161-162.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., P. 162.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., P. 163.



- (4) Encourage 'positive affect' (hope and elevated thoughts);
- (5) Identify underlying values, goals and motivation;
- (6) Encourage narration (life story, putting life in perspective, making sense of it);
- (7) Identify resources, protective factors and potentials of learners;
- (8) Validate effort rather than achievement;
- (9) ONLY THEN, if possible, talk about uncertainties, fears, lack of skills (Boniwell, 2003)<sup>1</sup>.

In practice "Strengths approach" can be used by adviser or counselor by asking new learner, first of all, about himself generally. Then adviser can ask about personal history and personal success stories of the trainee in detail using nine-points approach of "Strengths approach". Acquired information will eventually help him to identify trainee's possible strengths in learning process and let him know and use them in practice.

In order to make "Strengths Approach" and other motivational approaches generally more effective in practice they should be applied in proactive manner. The contact between educational institution and new learner needs to be proactive in terms of trainee support. Because as reality shows, trainees who need support services the most, they refer to them the least. In other words, reactive trainees support services which purport passive means of student support services including, for example, standard questionnaires evaluated by advisers or self assessed questionnaires are not so effective. Therefore, motivational approaches should be used proactively to be effective, especially, for trainees who are in strong need of trainee support.

As Anderson says, "Student self-referral does not work as a mode of promoting persistence. Proactive student support services should take the initiative in outreach and timely interventions with those students"<sup>2</sup>.

If a learner is enabled to be fully motivated by this approach, then it is likely he will explore issues of suitable preparation and learning skills development for himself, be more persistent when facing difficulties, and become an effective independent learner, doing whatever he needs to succeed.

### **Trainee support in e-learning**

Student support in e-learning is provided by educational organization in two ways – learner support and learning support.

In this case, learner support means a structured assistance to students through necessary information provision and consulting in terms of learning process management.

Learner support in e-learning is structured and includes the following phases:

- Information phase;
- Guidance phase;
- Registration phase;
- Integration phase;
- Accreditation Assistance Phase;
- Guidance on Further Study Phase.

Learning support means a structured assistance delivered by educational center in the actual process of learning. Learning support is provided in learning phase which is organized in online and offline learning formats. The process of offline and online learning is organized via delivery of e-learning content and use of e-mail technology, chats, discussion forums and etc. All these mechanisms allow interaction not only between tutor and trainee but also trainee to trainee.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., P. 165.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., P. 168.



In practice trainee support in e-learning programs might be implemented through:

- Delivery of distance education content through online learning techniques and offline learning platforms;
- Discussion forums. Discussion rooms for all trainees to exchange ideas in the framework of the course, raise questions, post comments etc. Discussion rooms must be under supervision of facilitator or tutor;
- Electronic tutorials. Electronic documents which allow trainees to meet their learning objectives;
- Resources / Library. Electronic access to supplementary resources to support trainee learning;
- Trainee - Self Assessment. The electronic mechanism to monitor the progress of a trainee in a specific course. This helps trainees to make sure whether they make a progress or not.
- Automated Assessment. This electronic facility allows producing a final result which is used in the certification phase.
- Tutor Assessment. The facility to send work to a tutor / teacher for correction and evaluation.
- Trainee Portfolios. A personal homepage per student to allow them to introduce themselves to online colleagues, showcase their work, provide alternative sources of course information to colleagues.

The provision of the following information and facilities in e-learning can be considered as parts of coherent service of student support (2, 2-3 p.)<sup>1</sup>.

Information relating to pricing
FAQ section on registration
Access to technical support services
Support regarding registration
Ability to contact tutors
Ability to contact other students
Advice on further study
Discussion forums
Electronic tutorials
Feedback on assignments
Tutor access

**Ամփոփագիր:** Հոդվածում անդրադարձ է կատարվում հեռաուսուցման համակարգերում և էլեկտրոնային ուսուցման ոլորտում «սովորողներին աջակցելու» խնդրին և կարևորությանը՝ հեռաուսուցման գործընթացում որակի ապահովման, ինչպես նաև արդյունավետ ուսանելու տեսանկյունից: Մասնավորապես, ներկայացվում են և վերլուծության են ենթարկվում «սովորողներին աջակցելու» եղանակները, ինչպես նաև պոզիտիվ հոգեբանության ոլորտում ձևավորված տեսական մոտեցումները, որոնք կարող են կիրառվել ուսուցման կազմակերպման գործընթացում՝ «ուսանողներին աջակցելու» համակարգի համատեքստում:

<sup>1</sup> D. Keegan, The role of student support in e-learning system. Ireland Ericsson. Adelphi Centre, Dun Loaghaire Ireland, 2003. P. 2-3.



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**Аннотация:** В данной статье автор показывает проблему и важность «содействия учащимся» в системах дистанционного и электронного обучения с целью как обеспечения качества образования, так и успешного обучения. В частности, в статье представлены и проанализированы методы «содействия учащимся», а также теоретические подходы, сформированные в области «позитивной психологии», которые могут использоваться в процессе организации обучения, направленные на «содействие учащимся» в ходе обучения.

**Հիմնարարներ՝** հեռակրթություն, բաց կրթություն, էլեկտրոնային ուսուցում, աջակցություն սովորողներին, պոզիտիվ հոգեբանություն:

**Key words:** distance education, open education, e-learning, trainee support, positive psychology.

**Ключевые слова:** дистанционное образование, открытое образование, электронное обучение, содействие учащимся, позитивная психология.